DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 294 229 CS 211 215

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TITLE Audience Awareness and Critical Essays on Literature: Helping Students Become Part of an Interpretive Community.
PUB DATE Mar 88
NOTE 26p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (39th, St. Louis, MO, March 17-19, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College English; Critical Reading; Critical Thinking; Essays; *Freshman Composition; Group Discussion; Higher Education; *Literary Criticism; Literature; Peer Evaluation; *Reader Response; Reader Text Relationship; Student Attitudes; Teaching Methods; Writing Exercises; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Audience Awareness; *Interpretive Communities; *Reader Response Criticism; Text Factors

ABSTRACT

Before students are able to write fairly original, successful, critical essays on literature, they need to become experienced members of the audience for whom they will write, sharing fully the social context of critical writing by becoming part of an interactive, interpretive community. This reader-response technique appears to be the best critical viewpoint for the freshman composition class to adopt. One way to guide students through this method is to first introduce the reading process, the basics of reader response, and German aesthetic theories. Students then react to literary works on the basis of their own unguided, unfocused, aesthetic reactions to the text. As students discover the elements of the literary work, the critical vocabulary they will need for their own critical essays is then introduced within the contexts of their discussions of the work. Next, students turn to the literary text itself in order to develop and support their viewpoints about that text, giving the text its proper power. As students working in an interpretive community with the literary text before them, they will exchange and confront one another's readings of the text and move from their own experience into the text itself in order to interpret how they all arrive at those meanings. Finally, the "alternative criteria of validity" that students agree upon within their interpretive communities can supply them with the problems they can define and solve in their essays. (Thirteen references are appended.) (MS)

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Audience Awareness and Critical Essays on Literature: Helping Students Become Part of an Interpretive Community

Running Head: Audience for Critical Essays

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Abstract

This essay examines the use of reader-response techniques in a writing about literature course, arguing that reader-response is the best critical viewpoint for the freshman composition classroom.

Students are first led in a discussion of the reading process and of the basics of reader reponse and German aesthetic theories. They then react to literary works on the basis of their own unguided, unfocused, aesthetic reactions to the text. As students hit upon the elements of the literary work, the critical vocabulary they'll need for their own critical essays is then introduced within the contexts of their discussions of the work. Next, students must turn to the literary text itself in order to develop and support their viewpoints about that text, giving the text its proper power.

Audience Awareness and Critical Essays on Literature: Helping Students Become Part of an Interpretive Community

When I recall the Literature and Composition course I took as an undergraduate, I hold in my mind a model of what I'd consider to be the "traditional" approach to teaching the critical essay in freshman composition. And I've discovered this model is still not untypical of how such courses are approached in many, many places. Elements of Literature was our text, and we covered short fiction, the novel, drama, poetry, and film, writing from one to two critical papers in each unit of the class. What I most remember is the paper I wrote on Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants," the first draft of which was liberally bled upon by my professor, who red-inked me for my "often original" yet "unsupported and unsupportable" interpretations of the story. He referred me to certain critics, certain critical articles, to a certain critical viewpoint . . . his own. The grade on that first draft--C+.

I rewrote the paper, sculpting a brilliant, pedestrian reading of "Hills Like White Elephants," explicating the symbolic significance of absinthe and wormwood and whatnot, liberally paraphrasing and quoting critics. The grade on that revised essay--A-. I wrote for and satisfied one audience--my professor. I became a part of a critical, interpretive community of two--of me and my professor. I engaged in what I now consider sort of an empty, intellectual exercise.

I then found myself, some years later, teaching the same class and determined not to teach it in the same way that my professor had. I wouldn't stifle my students' creativity, wouldn't be dogmatic with certain critical points of view, wouldn't this and wouldn't that. I, in short, attempted to be extremely objective when leading discussions about, in this case, Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. But I failed to heed Louise Rosenblatt's warning that

> Many contemporary critics and teachers evidently think that they are being "objective" when they discuss identifiable elements of the text. [I did when I was.] They do not include in their theoretical assumptions recognition of the fact that even the most objective analysis of "the poem" is an analysis of the work as they themselves have called it forth. [I didn't.] (15)

This failure on my part, especially in freshman composition where I was dealing with students mostly new to literature, much less to literary analysis, was responsible for a lot of the lousy writing that came out of that class. Some students, intimidated by my own or the critical edition's reading of the text, turned out safe plot summaries, others, oversimplified character sketches, and others, more confident of their ability to grasp my own point of view, verbatim regurgitation of my reading of the "poem." I know exactly how I feel about Ken Kesey's Cuckoo's Nest, and I discovered that better than half of my students also knew just exactly how I felt about it. Reading these essays was

like reading transcripts of my classroom "discussions." Still other students wrote the A- sorts of papers I'd written in my own Composition and Literature class: well-written and derivative in the extreme of accepted and acceptable critical points of view, points of view in this case neatly packaged for them in a Viking critical edition.

I realized after slogging through that group of some fifty essays that my students displayed as little real interaction with the text as I had for my own red-inking professor all those years before. And what was worse, I figured out, was that they had written these essays with only one audience in mind, me, and it was the fact of this audience that affected, molded, determined both their readings of the text and the ineffective writing of the essays. I began to see that before students are going to write fairly original, successful, critical essays on literature, they need to become experienced members of the audience for whom they will write, sharing fully the social context of critical writing by becoming part of an interactive, interpretive community. The value of such reader response as the critical viewpoint for the freshman composition classroom cannot be underestimated. Marjorie Roemer states the case of and the problems with this point of view well:

> Reader-response theory is a gesture toward opening up dialogue with students and problematizing questions of authority, but it can only be a significant gesture when appropriated by teachers who recognize the forces against which such freedom must contend. Unless we

> consciously set ourselves the task of making room for contesting views and urging serious, committed, personal interchanges, we will simply be presiding over the same "academic" exercises in a slightly more dynamic format. (920)

We can encourage enlightened reader response and avoid the usual "academic exercises" that the traditional teaching of the critical essay can so often become, and we can do so without teaching literature, per se, by bringing students together into an "interpretive community."

The first problem to overcome, one of those "forces" working against the freedom of reader-response, is the fact that, as Rosenblatt points out,

> Past literary experiences serve as subliminal guides as to the genre to be anticipated, the details to be attended to, the kinds of organizing patterns to be evolved. Each genre, each kind of work . . . makes its own kinds of conventional demands on the reader--that is, once he has set up one or another such expectation, his stance, the details he responds to, the way he handles his responses, will differ. (57)

These facts are also well recorded by Kathleen McCormick, who suggests that the banal reader responses our students often come up with, often, I am saying, as a result of our students' lack of past literary experiences, can be "redeemed . . . if the teacher

gives them focus" (837). And it is at this point where many of us find ourselves having to teach the work of literature we're dealing with. Most of our students have very little past literary experience, at least with the types of literature we ask them to respond to. Aside from having read, perhaps, Huck Finn or Catcher in the Rye or Romeo and Juliet in high school, readings that were, we know, quite often less than involved, students have little experience with literature, few of the past literary experiences that are so important to their abilities as critical readers of literature. (At least, I've found this to be true with most of my students.) We compound the problem, then, when we take into account their lack of experience with the discourse form we ask them to write--critical essays. "Given the assumption that the text offers a potentially meaningful set of linguistic symbols, the reader is faced with the adoption of either a predominantly efferent or a predominantly aesthetic stance. The 'socio-physical' setting, the nonverbal situation, may dictate the choice" (Rosenblatt 78). The "socio-physical" setting of the classroom, then, confuses matters even more, encouraging, by its very nature, efferent responses to literature that should be read aesthetically--"I've got to write an essay about this, and I've got to get it right." Many of us and many of our critical editions confuse students in this respect even more with our "readings" of literary texts, readings often so involved and, in our students' case, so prematurely sophisticated, that the reading of the literary text becomes in itself an efferent, academic activity. As Rosenblatt goes on to point out, "In the aesthetic transaction, the text possesses an especial importance.

In the efferent situation, a paraphrase or summary or restatement--in short, another text--may be as useful as the original text" (86). And so we needn't ask ourselves why Cliff and Monarch notes are such good sellers on college campuses, or why many students even attempt to bypass a close reading of the original text in favor of critical material. And as Rosenblatt says, "Accepting an account of someone else's reading or experience of a poem is analogous to seeking nourishment through having someone else eat your dinner for you and recite the menu" (86). Yet it is just this sort of accepting that students have done and that we've indirectly or directly required them to do for so many years. And I'd say that seeking such nourishment from Cliff or Monarch's note is analogous to eating plain-wrap dog food.

In place of these academic exercises, then, students must be made to realize, must be "instructed" in, if you will, must be given the opportunity to fully interact with the literary text. As Iser says,

> the text only takes on life when it is realized, and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader--though this in turn is acted upon by the different patterns of the text. The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence. . . . (274-275)

Prior to any of our own or others' critical readings of the text, prior to, that is, exposing students to records of other readers'

interactions with or realizations of the text, students must have their own interactions, their own realizations, independent of any other versions of the reality of the text and of other individual dispositions of readers.

Readers' first reactions to a literary text, as Rosenblatt, McCormick, and others have shown, are often personal in nature. Each reader is "actively involved in building up a poem for himself out of his responses to the text. He [has] to draw on his past experiences with the verbal symbols. He [has] to select from the various alternative referents that [occur] to him" (Rosenblatt 10). Readers', students' natural starting points when reading a work of literature should be to pay attention to the "images, feelings, attitudes, associations, and ideas that the words and their referents" evoke in them (Rosenblatt 10). As previously discussed, however, they do not, which is why we so often hear first reactions from our students such as "I don't know," or "I don't care." They've come into our classes thinking that there is a meaning they must find in the text, communicate in an essay to their instructor, and be graded on. Reading the text is, from the beginning, an efferent, problem-solving activity, far before it should be. We must guide our students to read the text aesthetically, to tap those images and feelings and associations that dwell within them and that text may evoke.

This is why I begin the semester with a discussion of the reader's role in making the meaning of a text. Most students, it's obvious, come in thinking that almost the sole responsibility for getting a message across through writing falls to the writer. (This is an odd fact, too, when you consider how

many of these same student writers will insist that any problems with their own essays are the reader's.) And so I give them a bit of an overview of reader-response theory. I don't confuse my students with a lot of jargon; I don't expect them to memorize or canonize Fish or Iser or Rosenblatt, but I spend a couple of classes discussing with them the reader's role in the making of meaning in a text. As I'm sure you know, many or most of these people have never been exposed to this viewpoint.

Once I've drilled my students rather relentlessly about it being all right for them to respond honestly to the text, I then have them do so, sharing their first, undirected written thoughts about the given text with one another in small groups. Peer responses to these first thoughts must be purely neutral in nature. I model this process first, providing students with a very short story, such as "Hills Like White Elephants," and asking students to provide their initial reactions to the story in a five- to ten- minute session of freewriting. Students volunteer or are selected to read their written reactions aloud, and the class is instructed to write out, in a sentence or two, the dominant theme[s] or idea[s] they hear emerging from those pieces of writing. The reactions must be non-critical at this point--must express neither agreement nor disagreement, like nor dislike of the students' ideas. What emerges for the students is a look at the at both the multiplicity and similarities of first readings of any given text. Quite often, students listening to one another's reactions can point out that John seems drawn to the story because the setting reminds him of a similar spot near his home along the California coast (one of the things that draws

me to Hemingway's story), or that Elizabeth's reactions seem to dwell on the feeling of eavesdropping on the couple's conversation, as if she were sitting at a table next to them, or that Christine "knows" that the man is trying to gracefully dump the woman, because Christine has seen and experienced just this sort of thing before. Important here is that students are writing real reactions, writings that will become the basis for the essays they'll later produce. And most important, students are being exposed to the knowledge, beliefs, opinions and so forth of the audience for whom they will be encouraged to write those essays. They are taking their first steps into what Bartholome and Petrosky have termed a "closed community, with its secrets, codes, and rituals" (279).

Next, then, it's important that students go on to explore why they react as they react to the text. Through questions such as those developed by Kathleen McCormick: "What is the Predominant Effect of the Text on You?"; "Why Do You Think the Text Had That Effect?"; and "What Does Your Response Tell You About Yourself?"; students are invited not only to examine both what they know about the literary text before them and what they know about themselves in relation to that text, but how they know what they know. These are the same perspectives they must eventually come to take of their audience for their essays; however, instead of attempting to take these perspectives prior to sufficient experience with the literary text, the discourse form, and the audience for whom they will write, they do so as they're gaining experience with each element of the rhetorical situation.

Now we must deal with the fact that sometimes, and in

freshman comp, quite often, the initial readings our students come up with will be off base, unsupported and unsupportable by the authority that the text itself does exercise in relation to the range of possible intepretations of its readers. And I'm not speaking here just of readings that don't agree with our own or with popular critical opinion, or of those that are but a little off--I am speaking also of those readings that come at us from somewhere out around the sixth planet from the sun in a neighboring solar system. It is here that both the literary text and the students' audience of peers will play a major part in exercising authority over the validity of individual interpretations.

First, there is the text itself, which, as Rosenblatt says, "may also lead [the student] to be critical of [his or her] prior assumptions and associations. . . . He may discover that he had projected on the text elements of his past experience not relevant to it, and which are not susceptible of coherent incorporation into it" (11). You see, I don't mean, with all this talk about the readers' responses, about letting students respond to literary works from their own viewpoints and largely on their own, to advocate what Rosenblatt terms a kind of "brash literary egalitarianism." Along with Rosenblatt, I'd say that

> What each reader makes of the text is, indeed, <u>for him</u>, the poem, in the sense that this is his only direct perception of it. No one else can read it for him. He may learn indirectly about others' experiences with the text; he may come to see that his own was confused or

> impoverished, and he may then be stimulated to attempt to call forth from the text a better poem. But this he must do himself, and only what he himself experiences in relation to the text is--again let us underline--<u>for him</u>, the work. (105)

We must "face the uniquely personal character of literary experience, and then . . . discover how in this situation critical discrimination and sound criteria of interpretation can be achieved" (Rosenblatt 105). All interpretations aren't relative or relatively correct, which is a charge often levelled against reader-response by critics such as Abrams, who, in Fish's words, contends that

> authority depends upon the existence of a determinate core of meanings because in the absence of such a core there is no normative or public way of construing what anyone says or writes, with the result that interpretation becomes a matter of individual and private construings none of which is subject to challenge or correction. (317)

As Fish goes on to point out, though, this is an extreme position. "The answer . . . is that communication occurs within situations and that to be in a situation is already to be in possession of (or to be possessed by) a structure of assumptions, of practices understood to be relevant in relation to purposes and goals that are already in place" (318). The practices we're

interested in, then, are the practices of what Les Perelman would call the context of the classroom, of the institution, of what I'm calling the interpretive community our students represent in the classroom. "Language is always perceived . . . within a structure of norms . . . that is not abstract and independent but social" (Fish 318).

Iser, too, has pointed out that

> If interpretation has set itself the task of conveying the meaning of a literary text, obviously the text itself cannot have already formulated that meaning. How can the meaning possibly be experienced if--as is always assumed by the classical norm of interpretation--it is already there, merely waiting for a referential exposition? As meaning arises out of the process of actualization, the interpreter should perhaps pay more attention to the process than to the product. His object should therefore be, not to explain a work, but to reveal the conditions that bring about its various possible effects. If he clarifies the <u>potential</u> of a text, he will no longer fall into the fatal trap of trying to impose one meaning on his reader, as if that were right, or at least the best, interpretation. (18)

This idea of the meaning not already being contained within the text, before and without any interaction with a reader, is most important to this discussion. In the same way that we have come to learn that the process of writing is a process of making

meaning, not merely of figuring out ways of best communicating truths that already exist, readers too make meaning of the texts they experience; writers must be acutely aware, then, that they are not simply dictating meaning that already exists to readers--they must be aware that they are interacting with readers in a process of making meaning. And this is very difficult for student writers to do when they're presented with critical "readings" of the texts they're asked to interact with, readings that seem to suggest that such and such a meaning is there, in the text, and they'll find it and "get" it if only they're good enough literary detectives. Being instead aware of and experiencing the multiplicity of readers' responses to a text, writers must think of the audiences for their own essays in different ways from those dictated by the "classical norms" of audience awareness--their audience's race, religion, political affiliations, for example. A simple accounting of the audience's demographics may've been sufficient for an orator in Aristotle's time, given the time's understanding of the nature of knowledge. Those same concerns will be insufficient in many if not most cases, though, of transactive communication between writers and readers of critical essays.

And so students, working in an interpretive community with the literary text before them, and working with their slightly more focused, second or third responses to the text, should be encouraged to exchange and often challenge one another's assumptions about the "poem." As Roemer suggests about the work of Paulo Friere (Pedagogy of the Oppressed),

> students with different ways of reading [a work of literature should] be forced to confront one another, and the assumptions on which these different readings rest [should] have to be examined. In this way ingrained habits of making meaning, both in the text and in the world, come under examination; and while the classroom still helps to elaborate and refine perception, it no longer assumes that we all start with the same set of associations or commitments. Not only are interpretive techniques introduced here, but the meanings we each derive from them are examined. . . .
>
> [These are] reader-response techniques contextualized. The participants in these discussion circles are bringing their whole selves to bear on the exchange. Their idiosyncracies, their particular cultural circumstances, are the subject of investigation; they are not extraneous to it. . . . (919)

I don't mean to say that, as teachers, we merely put our students into groups, stand back, and let them have at it in a sort of critical free-for-all. Yes, we must interact and intervene regularly. There are points where we must come in to introduce, for example, the critical concepts and vocabulary without which their eventual task as critical writers would be very difficult--plot, setting, structure, theme, symbolism, point of view, etc. All of this must be done, but not in the traditional vacuum of the classroom lecture--rather, it must be

done in the context of the students' reactions to the text. By giving them not only the vocabulary of critical response but the knowledge and background of literary critical thought, we lend authority and confidence to their interpretive communities, an authority and confidence very much subject to their own reactions to the "poem." Recall my examples of students' possible initial reactions to "Hills Like White Elephants": after having been introduced to a critical vocabulary and critical principles, John can realize that in his initial reaction to the story's setting he has set upon an important element of fiction; Elizabeth can give a name--point of view, or effaced narrator--to her feelings of eavesdropping on the couple in the cafe; Christine can begin to speculate about theme or meaning in the story. So important here is the fact that students feel as if they're arriving at all this pretty much on their own authority; they discover that they've come into their interactions with the text already to a certain extent equipped to critically interact with that text. We're not imposing rather artificial, outside constraints on their readings or their reactions.

As students exchange and confront one another's readings of the text, then, they must move from their own experience into the text itself in order to interpret how they all arrive at those meanings. This is where the text melds with the interpretive community in determining the viability of readings and interpretations.

From considering and confronting the multiplicity of meanings readers bring to literary texts, from becoming part of an interpretive community that exercises authority over ranges of

interpretation, students must next transfer this knowledge into active consideration of the readers of their own, critical texts. As Bartholome and Petrosky put it, "The student has to appropriate or be appropriated by a specialized discourse, and he has to do this as though he were easily and comfortably one with his audience. . ." (279). Once they've become serious, rhetorically involved members of the interpretive community for whom they will write, students are able to begin to construct an internal representation of their readers much more easily and comfortably than they are otherwise, and they are able to translate those constructs into critical texts that contain, if you will, those readers. As Rubin points out,

> It is difficult to write in a genre for which one lacks corresponding audience constructs. Construct repertoires are generally adequate for construing familiar audiences--those associated with informal genres. But many eighteen-year-old, otherwise cognitively mature, college freshmen may lack constructs necessary to represent effectively the type of audience associated with the typical freshman theme. (223)

In the traditional approach to the critical essay, little if any attempt is made to supply students with the constructs necessary for them to come up with any representation of the audience for a critical essay, which is even more of an abstract thing to most of them than the audience for other freshman themes. And as I

also suggested above, students' attempts to get to "know" their audience of "real" readers through most traditional means will be frustrated by how little such knowledge of such readers will apply to their rhetorical situation. ". . .the task of analyzing audience is a matter of identifying the nature of the contexts that are already given by some aspect of the occasion of publication and of understanding the relationship between those that are given and those that must be more explicitly defined within the discourse itself" (Park 253). Of course, the context, the occasion of publication, is peculiar to critical essays about literature.

> Another part of the task is understanding how particular contexts are created within the discourse. . . .in public prose [in critical essays], it is a matter of shaping into a rhetorical situation the potential bits of opinion, knowledge, motives for interest that lie about in the public domain in no particular form. The writer invents, so to speak, their significance and, in doing so, creates an audience. (Park 253)

This, as you know, builds upon the foundation that Ong laid for the viewpoint of how writers bring forth representations of their audience. As Ong says, "the writer must construct in his imagination, clearly or vaguely, an audience cast in some sort of role. . . .the audience must correspondingly fictionalize itself. A reader has to play the role in which the author has cast him,

which seldom coincides with his role in the rest of life" (12). In the traditional approach to teaching the critical essay on literature, then, there is little opportunity for students to fictionalize themselves as an audience for critical essays, little when the task at hand seems to them to be one of repeating or mimicking the critical points of view presented to them by their texts and instructors. Consequently, as writers of critical essays, they cannot take any sort of perspective of an audience for these essays--the only audience is the instructor, the only purpose the grade, and these assumptions show through very clearly in the quality of the writing.

Iser also differentiates between the "'real ' reader, known to us by his documented reactions," and the

> "hypothetical" reader, upon whom all possible actualizations of the text may be projected. The latter category is frequently subdivided into the so-called ideal reader and the contemporary reader. The first of these cannot be said to exist objectively, while the second, though undoubtedly there, is difficult to mould to the form of a generalization. (27)

It is just this sort of hypothetical, ideal reader much freshman composition instruction asks students to analyze, a reader who, according to Iser, cannot even be said to exist objectively. Such a reader must be a subjective creation of the writer, and so the question arises, how can a reader analyze a subjective creation by the traditional measures of that audience? Even when we're

asking students to write critical essays for an identifiably "real" audience of their peers, such a rhetorically involved audience of peers will be a subjective creation of the writer, since not many of these real peers will really care much about one another's critical essays, at least in the beginning. The "real" reader our students are aiming at is one of the three "contemporary" readers that Iser defines, one who is "extrapolated from the reader's role laid down in the text" (28). These readers are very much a part of what Fish terms an "interpretive community," sharing in a common knowledge, sharing a common set of concerns, a common vocabulary--a community we rarely give our students a chance to form for themselves.

When a critical, interpretive community has been established, then, one in which students next exchange and edit one another's drafts of their critical essays, students have experienced fictionalizing themselves as an audience for those essays, they have played the role, and will thus be more prepared to construct in their imaginations an audience playing the corresponding role. In this way students experience the multiplicity of readers' reactions to texts both literary and critical. We have taught them, or enabled them to learn, perhaps better said, not only the important dynamics of the literary text but, by extension, any text written as a transaction between writer and reader(s).

Finally, then, Susan Peck MacDonald's look at "Problem Definition in Academic Writing," where she compares writing in the sciences (specifically, psychology) to literary interpretation, is a nice bit of evidence suggesting that our traditional approach to the critical essay in freshman

composition may be misinformed. After looking at six psychology articles and six from PMLA, MacDonald concludes that each is a problem-solving activity, and that

> While the literary problems are less publicly discernible and limited in number, their degree of communality relative to the psychology articles is harder to assess. Something like Stanley Fish's 'interpretive community' is clearly evident in that communal assumptions determine the coherence of the articles [to a much greater extent than in articles from other disciplines]. (321)

Saying that when writing about literature, students too often have "a subject but not a problem to begin with," MacDonald suggests that "while the student gropes with all the difficulty of finding or constructing meaning, he has to deal with the further difficulty of choosing and defining a problem to start with. Since he probably is too inexperienced to know that a well-defined problem will help him decide in which direction to go, he has no means of choosing one of the many directions he could go in" (327). And our traditional approaches haven't done much to provide students with the stuff they need to deal with these problems. Defining their problems for them certainly hasn't worked. And as I've said, providing students with critical editions and various "readings" of the text often only confuses matters that much more.

What Rosenblatt calls for are "alternative criteria of

validity" of interpretation (127). These "alternative criteria" are what students must be encouraged to arrive at and deal with as an interpretive community, to deal with, as Roemer says, in "serious, committed, personal interchanges" (920). And to deal with, of course, with sufficient guidance from us. The alternative criteria of validity that students agree upon within their interpretive communities can supply them with the problems they can define and solve in their essays. Once students are able to define and solve these problems, once they've established themselves as authoritative, interpretive communities, they are interacting at every phase of the reading and writing process with the audience they'll direct their critical essays towards, and we instructors can begin to be spared many of the weak character sketches, safe plot summaries, and pedestrian rehashings of our viewpoints we've so often had to endure over the years.

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